



T E X A S ☆ T I M E S

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Watching for Birds

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

As prices for oil and gas remain unacceptably high, Texas is turning to alternative energy sources. Texas already leads the nation in generating electricity through wind power – much of it in the Panhandle. Now there are proposals to build big wind turbine farms along the Gulf near Galveston and Corpus Christi.

But there are complications. Environmentalists point to the Texas coast as a prime travel route for hundreds of bird species migrating to and from Mexico and Central America. Researchers are making certain the wind farm propellers will pose no danger to the migrating birds. It's all a reminder that virtually every "easy" solution to our energy supply problems has a potential downside.

It also points out the growing importance of birds to Texas. Bird-watching has become one of the state's more popular pastimes and tourism attractions. The American Birding Association has named Texas the best place to bird-watch for five consecutive years. 'Birding,' as it's known, is our state's fastest-growing form of nature tourism. That has two beneficial consequences: it promotes the conservation of natural habitats, and it strengthens our local economies.

Texas is home to a greater variety of birds—more than 600—than any other state. Three-quarters of all American birds either migrate through Texas or reside here. One reason is our diverse surface geography. Another is our key location in traditional migration patterns. And maybe even birds know what we know: Texas is just a great place to be.

In the early days of the Texas Republic, famed naturalist James J. Audubon landed at Galveston and traveled parts of Texas sketching wildlife for his classic book, "Birds of America." It's safe to say he was impressed. Visiting South Texas in 1837, Audubon observed, among other birds, the ivory-billed woodpecker. Until it was reportedly spotted again last year in Arkansas, the ivory-bill had been considered extinct for 60 years.

Great birding venues exist all across our state. A watcher with good eyesight can see 10 types of hummingbirds in the Davis Mountains in West Texas. Bird watching can be combined with general enjoyment of the wilderness – near Alamo, Texas, you might see various birds, butterflies and even a rare ocelot at the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. In the often tropical weather of the Rio Grande Valley, birders may spot spectacular visitors such as a Mexican northern jacana, with its bright yellow-green wings.

But the Texas Gulf Coast is properly described as the crown jewel of bird-watching venues. The Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail spans the entire 624 miles of our Gulf Coast, from Beaumont to Brownsville –

the first of its kind in the nation. Included in this vast spread – big even by Texas standards – is the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, just north of Rockport, winter home to the endangered whooping crane. Further south on the trail, native birds such as the oriole, the flycatcher and the kingfisher congregate in a much-visited state park on the Rio Grande.

Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, near Mission, houses the headquarters of our World Birding Center. It's a collaboration of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services and nine Valley communities. The 10,000-acre center's mission is protecting native habitat and increasing awareness and appreciation of birds and wildlife. It opened officially only in 2003, but it's already world famous.

The Center is actually nine different sites. It includes a wide array of habitats along a 120-mile stretch from South Padre Island west to Roma, Texas. The Center promises visitors a "birders' eye view" of the seasons in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. In winter, there are warblers, sparrows and purple martins. The spring brings swallows and migrating raptors. Summer offers the long-billed curlews and orchard orioles. With autumn arrive buntings, cuckoos and ruby-throated hummingbirds.

This is all great for Texas tourism. In 2001, wildlife-associated recreation – fishing, hunting, and wildlife-viewing, including birding – contributed \$4.7 billion to the Texas economy. Nature tourism alone contributed \$301 million in additional local tax revenues.

Bird-watching offers a great opportunity to enhance enjoyment of nature and further our understanding of nature's delicate relationship with man. For communities and the entire state, bird-watching provides the all-too-rare harmony between economic well-being and environmental conservation.

Texans are fortunate indeed. Almost year-round, we need look no further than our own backyard to watch a woodpecker negotiate the trunk of a tree, or listen to a mockingbird croon from a tree branch. Watching the millions of birds that live in or visit Texas is yet another great way to enjoy the beauty of our state.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is also the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. He served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.